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ABSTRACT

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Developmental Placement of Intellectually Gifted Children

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Abstract

This paper describes a policy of placement of gifted children within the regular school program according to each gifted child's intellectual, educational, and other development. The rationale for such a placement policy rests on a developmental conception of gifted children being like older children. The policy of developmental placement is contrasted with the policies of enrichment and separate programs. The relative advantages of developmental placement should make it more feasible for schools to attend to the needs of gifted children.

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Meeting the needs of intellectually gifted children has always been a problem in the public schools. Proposals for enrichment and separate programs are too frequently blocked by practical, political, and empirical considerations. The literature on gifted children suggests a different type of proposal, one which some may be tempted to call acceleration, but which should more accurately be called developmental placement.

Background

The practical and empirical shortcomings of enrichment and separate programs for gifted students have been widely discussed. These two approaches have been critically reviewed by others from the perspectives of students, teachers, administrators, and parents. Budgetary considerations, educational priorities, concerns about elitism, and doubts about the effectiveness of enrichment and separate programs are among the major recurrent issues. Such reservations about enrichment and separate programs underscore the importance of considering alternatives if the needs of gifted children are to be met.

The rationale for any educational policy for intellectually gifted children depends upon our conceptions of gifted children's intellectual, educational, social, emotional, and physical characteristics. Arguments offered to support enrichment and separate programs usually reflect a conception of gifted children as being different from other children. If gifted children were different from other children, and especially if different principles of development and learning applied to them, then it

would be logical to educate gifted children in separate classrooms with special teachers, using special textbooks that teach a different kind of science, math, English, and social studies.

Theories of learning and development explain how intellectually gifted children are actually like other children. Gifted children are precocious, but they are not different. The same principles and stages of learning and development apply to both gifted children and other children. The various theories of reinforcement, information processing, and cognitive development pertain to all children. It is the level of gifted children's development which distinguishes them from their agemates. For more than fifty years, beginning with Lewis Terman's study of gifted children, it has been known that intellectually gifted children are more advanced educationally, socially, emotionally, and physically than their age peers. In other words, gifted children are more like older children.

IQ, which still provides the most common basis for identifying gifted children, was grounded from the beginning in the notion that some children perform like older children. Although psychometricians have refined the statistical procedures for assigning IQ scores, the popular conception is still that IQ is a function of mental age. Although it is not strictly correct to say that a ten year old with an IQ of 130 has the mental age of a thirteen year old, it is reasonable to say that such a child functions intellectually at a level which is typical for children who are more than ten years old.

Developmental Placement

To the degree that intellectually gifted children are like older children, it makes sense to educate them like older children. The deve-

lopmental placement of gifted children according to each child's intellectual, educational, social, emotional, and physical status would permit gifted children to benefit more from the resources which are already established in the schools. In addition, developmental placement avoids many of the problems associated with enrichment and separate programs, and it improves upon simple, rarely practiced policies of acceleration.

If a gifted child's intellectual level and academic achievement are far above the levels for classmates, then such a child should be placed in a classroom with older children where the levels of intellectual development and achievement are more appropriate, with the qualification that the child's intellectual level and academic achievement should be above the average level of the new classmates. Percentiles based on local norms could be used in placing a gifted child with older children. The cutoffs which are proposed here are used only as examples which are consistent with the intent of developmental placement. The basic criterion is that the child's level of intellectual development should exceed the 80th percentile for the older chilren. To place the child with the older children in one subject area, the child should exceed the 70th percentile for the older children's achievement in that subject area. To place the child with older children in all subject areas, the child should exceed the 50th percentile in five-sixths of the subjects and the 30th percentile in the rest. If the child's reading development does not exceed the 50th percentile of the older children, then the relevance of the child's reading ability for the proposed placement should be carefully considered. Meeting these criteria should insure that the intent of developmental placement is met: that the child will still have the experience

of being a good student while at the same time being more in step with the teacher and with classmates.

Social, emotional, and physical development should not be major considerations in the placement of gifted children. A child ought to be placed with older children if the intellectual and educational cutoffs described above are exceeded and the child also exceeds the 33rd percentile of the older children for social and emotional development and the 10th percentile for physical development. Children at any age level are clearly diverse in their social, emotional, and physical development. The criteria in these areas should be set only high enough to insure that the child will not be at a special disadvantage in trying to fit in non-academically with the older children.

Not only do gifted chidlren develop faster than age peers, they also develop faster than the older children with whom they might be placed. Consequently, many gifted children should be placed ahead of their classmates more than once during their school years. A yearly review would determine whether each child is appropriately placed.

Discussion

There are a number of advantages of developmental placement. The gifted student will be exposed earlier to the greater variety and depth of subject matter in the higher grade levels. There will be greater academic challenge. The social and intellectual environment will be more mature and thus more congenial. Normal tendencies toward conformity too often result in gifted children hiding their intellectual abilities when they are in classrooms with children who are at lower developmental levels. When gifted children are placed with older children, conformity would be

less likely to suppress behaviors which are consistent with the gifted children's developmental level.

Teachers should find that developmental placement reduces the heterogeneity of developmental levels in every classroom, which makes the task of attending to the needs of each child easier. There should be less of a need for teachers to commit part of their limited time to enrichment. Two significant shortcomings of separate programs for the gifted are that the special training which qualifies teachers is often difficult to obtain and expensive. Developmental placement has the advantage that any teacher is considered qualified to work with a child who is appropriately placed in the teacher's classroom.

Except for budgetary and administrative constraints, enrichment and separate programs are generally attractive to administrators because the programs are formal institutional commitments to individual needs and they are good for public relations when they are consistent with the expectations and priorities of the community. Developmental placement would offer these advantages, too, but at a minimal cost and without the need to reallocate teachers and materials. The benefits of enrichment and separate programs depend on the availability of special resources, which is not the case with developmental placement. Developmental placement should actually save taxpayer's money as more children finish the college preparatory curriculum one or more years ahead of the regular schedule. Developmental placement is less likely than enrichment and separate programs to be perceived as displacing programs that have higher priority in the community. Developmental placement is also less likely to be seen as elitist or undemocratic, because the gifted children and other children

will be in the same classrooms with the same teachers and the same textbooks.

Developmental placement is not a perfect solution to the intellectual, educational, social, emotional, and psycho-physical needs of gifted children. So long as the resources committed to education are limited, meeting all the needs of gifted children will compete with meeting the needs of other children. There will always be resistance in our egalitarian society to proposals that the public schools reserve enrichment and other special educational opportunities for the gifted. Until we can provide all children with more interesting, more individualized, and more effective education, developmental placement of gifted children would be a reasonable compromise which places gifted children more appropriately within the same educational system that is available to all children.

The policy of developmental placement follows logically from the observation that intellectually gifted children are like older children. The financial, political, and other practical advantages of developmental placement make it more likely than other approaches to serve the unmet needs of gifted children. A major shortcoming is that developmental placement is not a real change in the way we educate; it is only a change in the placement of some children <u>within the existing system</u>. But this weakness is also a strength because this makes it structurally, economically, and politically more feasible for schools to attend to the needs of gifted children.